National Child Care Information Center
A service of the Child Care Bureau

NCCIC

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ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION: BECOMING AN EDUCATED CONSUMER

PART III: ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

This document is intended to provide basic information, examples or definitions, and resources on accountability systems. An understanding of these issues and where to go for further information and expertise will assist policy-makers as they participate in State discussions around school readiness, program evaluation, and accountability to ensure the quality, access, funding, and affordability of early care and education for all young children. This resource will help you become an "educated consumer" on this topic. There are two more documents in this series—Part I addresses child assessment and Part II addresses program evaluation.

Note: Accountability systems are often referred to as high-stakes testing or assessment and refer to the fact that funding and/or other decisions with a "high stake" are often made on the basis of the results of the data collected.

WHAT ARE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS?

The field often talks about using accountability systems to provide evidence to justify public funding. An *accountability system* includes strategies for addressing multiple components of the system and can use both child assessment and program evaluation data to justify funding of programs.

On the Federal level, Head Start programs are required to participate in the National Reporting System, an assessment system to measure young children's development to determine program effectiveness. Programs must comply with other elements of the accountability system, such as performance standards and child outcomes. A few States mandate assessing young children as part of a Statewide accountability system. For example, California's publicly funded contracted child care and early education programs are mandated to participate in the *Desired Results System.* Maryland's and Florida's publicly funded kindergarten programs are also required to participate in a school readiness accountability system.

KEY POINTS:

➢ States are struggling to balance increasing pressure for accountability and the design challenges of data collection, which could be harmful to children or families if not analyzed, reported, or used appropriately.

➢ In order to judge the effectiveness of a particular program or initiative reliably, the accountability system must consider multiple elements of the infrastructure that impact the quality or expected outcomes.

> For example, a State-level accountability system has to consider multiple Federal and State initiatives and priorities, sometimes including legislative mandates. A program-level accountability system needs to include the various inputs to the program at the policy, administrative, staff, and child/family level.

➢ An accountability system may use data collected on programs, teachers, or children; but the analysis of the data should be aggregated (in other words, individual scores are not used) to determine effects and/or justify funding.

➢ Quality Rating Systems, in many cases, have been implemented as an accountability system strategy to assess child care program quality, provide a variety of strategies to improve program quality, and report the results to the public to educate consumers and justify public funding.

EXAMPLES OF NATIONAL AND STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS:

Head Start
The Head Start Bureau is documenting Head Start's effectiveness nationally in a valid and reliable way by using the same set of tools to collect information from each Head Start program. The National Reporting System (NRS) will not report or examine individual child progress; local programs in partnership with parents will make decisions on how to use individual information. The NRS, in combination with the Head Start Performance Standards and Child Outcomes Framework, will be used to monitor program compliance, and assess the long-term impact of Head Start programs on child outcomes. Information on the NRS is available on the Web at http://www.headstartinfo.org/nrs_i&r.htm.

Maryland
Maryland's Model of School Readiness is a comprehensive system of support and training for teachers, standards for children's learning and program performance, information for parents, and assessment of children. The model, developed by the Maryland Department of Education, is implemented in all public school kindergarten, prekindergarten, and most early childhood special education classrooms as well as in many child care and Head Start programs. Each fall, all kindergarten teachers assess children using a modified version of the *Work Sampling System* and report this data to the Department of Education. The Department of Education submits a report based on this and other data to the General Assembly each November about the level of school readiness Statewide. Information is available on the Web at http://www.mdk12.org/instruction/ensure/MMSR/.

Oklahoma
Oklahoma's Quality Rating System, Reaching for the Stars, was designed to provide a system to inform parents of quality criteria met by child care programs; improve the quality of child care by increasing the competence of teachers; and raise the subsidy reimbursement rate, resulting in

more slots for children whose families are receiving child care assistance. Launched in 1998, Oklahoma's system is a combination of a Quality Rating System and tiered reimbursement. Training on program evaluation is provided to participants in the system. An observational study was conducted in 1999, and in 2001-2002 a validation study was conducted on a Statewide representative sample. Based on interviews, survey data, and classroom observation scores, the results revealed that child care quality had improved since the inception of the system. Information is available on the Web at http://www.okdhs.org/childcare/.

RESOURCES:

For information on the research about the impact of tiered quality strategies on child care quality, including information about the study design for research in progress and information about Environmental Rating Scales, see the following:

- *Tiered Quality Strategies and the Impact on Quality Child Care* (October 2004), by the National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC). This resource and others related to quality are available on the NCCIC Web site at http://nccic.org/poptopics/tqs-impactqualitycc.html.

For information on how the National Reporting System is being implemented and Government Accountability Office's suggestions for changes to improve the reliability and usability of the data, see the following:

- "*Head Start: Further Development Could Allow Results of New Test to Be Used for Decision Making*" (May 2005), by the Government Accountability Office. This resource is available on the Web at http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05343.pdf.

For information on how to develop an accountability system that is inclusive of children with special needs, see the following:

- *Considerations Related to Developing a System for Measuring Outcomes for Young Children with Disabilities and their Families* (April 2004), produced by the Early Childhood Outcomes Center. This resource is available on the Web at http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~eco/pdfs/considerations.pdf.

For video clips and print and Web resources related to a variety of efforts to support quality and specific information on the Quality Rating Systems in Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Kentucky, see the following:

- *Leading the Way to Quality Early Care and Education* (2005), produced by the Child Care Bureau, is a CD-ROM technical assistance tool. This resource is available for free and may be ordered on the Web at http://nccic.org/CD-2005.

For a detailed discussion on developing Statewide accountability systems—including how to minimize risks, criteria for choosing individual measures or a set of measures, and challenges (and suggestions for addressing them) for States developing school readiness assessments—see the following:

- *Assessing the State of State Assessments: Perspectives on Assessing Young Children* (2003), eds. Catherine Scott-Little, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Richard M. Clifford, produced by the South Eastern Regional Education Laboratory (SERVE). This

resource is available on the Web at
http://www.serve.org/_downloads/REL/ELO/ASSA.pdf.

For more information on developing baselines and benchmarks for measuring school readiness and a discussion of the issues and options for States developing and implementing a Statewide school readiness assessment system—such as frequency of testing and method of assessment, including the approaches of Maryland, Missouri, and Vermont—see the following:

- *Measuring Children's School Readiness: Options for Developing State Baselines and Benchmarks* (March 2003), by Charles Bruner and Abby Copeman, for the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN). This resource is available on the Web at http://www.finebynine.org/pdf/Baselines.pdf.

The following document identifies the complexities in creating accountability systems, such as multiple accountability initiatives, confusion about terms, and the alignment of initiatives. Kentucky is used as a State example to show alignment of initiatives in the development of the State accountability system. Questionnaires to guide the development of accountability systems, the selection of standards and outcomes, and the development of measurement processes are included.

- *Issues in Designing State Accountability Systems* (August 2004), by Gloria Harbin, Beth Rous, and Mary McLean, produced by the presenters of a conference presentation sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. This resource is available on the Web at http://www.ihdi.uky.edu/Sparc/Issues_in_Accountability.pdf.

For a discussion of the indicators identified by the School Readiness Indicators Initiative's work with 17 States to develop a comprehensive set of school readiness indicators, see the following:

- *Getting Ready: National School Readiness Indicators Initiative – A 17 Start Partnership* (February 2005), prepared by Rhode Island Kids Count. This resource is available on the Web at http://gettingready.org/matriarch/.

To access the Microsoft PowerPoint presentation "Building a System for Successful Learners: The Role of Standards, Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability" and brief fact sheets, linked to a glossary and resources, see the following Web site:

- Early Childhood Education Assessment Consortium, sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The site includes a number of resources for State policy-makers on standards and assessment. This resource is available on the Web at http://www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early_Childhood_Education_Assessment_Consortium/.

HOW CAN I WORK WITH MY LEGISLATORS TO DEVELOP A REASONABLE APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABILITY?

Recommendations from other States suggest that the best approach is to assist legislators (and governors) in becoming more knowledgeable about the research on early childhood assessment and program evaluation. Preparing brief documents, supported by the research and including a few key references for further information (such as an excerpt from this document), is helpful in expanding the knowledge base of legislators while meeting their need for accountability.

KEY POINTS:

➢ Assist legislators in understanding that effective, scientifically rigorous methods to determine accountability require that there is a strong match between 1) the purpose of the data collection; 2) the measures used to collect the data; and 3) the strategies of data analysis.

➢ Assist legislators in focusing their efforts on clearly identifying the type of information they want to justify funding and then work with legislators to identify experts in the field to identify how best to get the data.

➢ High-quality research on some questions of interest to legislators does exist—for example, the research on the impact of program quality on child outcomes—and this research may be brought to legislators' attention to assist them in answering questions related to the efficacy of early care and education.

➢ Research shows that strategies such as sampling children and using multiple assessment tools are effective in determining program impacts while reducing the costs and burdens of testing very large groups of children.

EXAMPLES OF ORGANIZATIONS PRODUCING MATERIALS TO ASSIST POLICY-MAKERS:

Council of Chief State School Officers
The Early Childhood Education Assessment (ECEA) Consortium was initiated in 2000 to provide guidance to decision-makers on appropriate assessment systems in order to promote and ensure high-quality learning opportunities for young children. The Consortium's focus is on early childhood learning and developmental outcomes, appropriate assessment, program evaluation, and using data for system accountability.

The work produced by the Consortium assists States in addressing issues related to the development of children from birth through age 8 years. This project provides useful information and resources to help States develop assessment systems that are appropriate for all children, including those from various cultural and economic backgrounds, children who are learning English, and children with disabilities. Additionally, ECEA also communicates useful information about children's growth and development in multiple domains to educators, caregivers, policy-makers, parents, and the general public.

State assessment and early childhood staff, representatives from key early childhood education organizations—such as the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDEs), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative (ECAP) at the University of Illinois-Urbana, and the South Eastern Regional Education Laboratory (SERVE)—and expert consultants from the field are participating in this project. This resource is available on the Web at http://www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early_Childhood_Education_Assessment_Consortium/.

School Readiness Indicators Project
School Readiness Indicators: Making Progress for Young Children recently completed a multi-State initiative to support State and local communities' efforts to improve school readiness and ensure early school success. The task of participating States was to develop a set of child outcome and system indicators for children from birth through the 4th grade. States created a set of measurable indicators related to school readiness that can be tracked regularly over time at the State and local levels and are reporting findings to State residents. A further goal is to stimulate policy, program, and other actions to improve the ability of all children to read at grade level by the end of the 3rd grade. Information on each of the 17 States that participated in the project and related resources are available on the Web at http://gettingready.org/matriarch/.

RESOURCES:

For a brief review of the research regarding assessing young children and policy implications, see the following:
- "Preschool Assessment: A Guide to Developing a Balanced Approach" (July 2004), in *NIEER Preschool Policy Matters* Issue 7, by Ann Epstein, Lawrence Schweinhart, Andrea De Bruin-Parecki, and Kenneth Robin, published by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). This resource is available on the Web at http://nieer.org/docs/index.php?DocID=104.

For tips on how to write effective briefs and prepare presentations for legislators, see the following:
- *Learning a New Language: Effectively Communicating Early Childhood Research to Legislators* (Summer 2004), in *The Evaluation Exchange* Volume X, No. 2, by Jack Tweedie. This resource is available on the Web at http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue26/bbt3.html.

- In the same issue of *The Evaluation Exchange*, also see "Supporting Governor's Early Childhood Policy Decisions: The Role of Research," by Anna Lovejoy, available on the Web at http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue26/bbt4.html.

For information on policy recommendations that governors and States can take to ensure that families, schools, and communities are ready to support children's school readiness, see the following:
- *Final Report on the NGA Task Force on School Readiness: Building the Foundation for Bright Futures* (2005), produced by the National Governor's Association. This

resource is available on the Web at
http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0501TaskForceReadiness.pdf.

■ For information on best practices and promising State strategies, see the companion document, *Building the Foundations for Bright Futures: A Governor's Guide to School Readiness* (2005), by the National Governors Association, available on the Web at http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0501TaskForceReadiness.pdf.

The National Child Care Information Center does not endorse any organization, publication, or resource.

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